

The Importance of Cross-Cultural Competency for ASEAN Integration; The Internationalization of the Universities

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Abstract

In the wake of the 21st century, the importance of international regional connectivity such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) can no longer be undermined among its member states and beyond. Obviously, such regional integration comes with huge socioeconomic and political benefits as well as challenges. Thus, each member states' ability to overcome the challenges and maximize the 'mutual' benefits from such economic block demands enhanced cross-cultural competency (the process of adapting to a new environment and its requirements through obtaining necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that could place its citizens at par or ahead of its neighbors. Between 2004 and 2008, Thai higher institutions offered a total of 3,441 international programs using English as a medium of expression across its tertiary education institutions. By 2013, the number went up to 1,044 international programs offered by both Thai private and public institutions in that year alone. Despite the acknowledged growing trend and demand for such cross-cultural competencies that has triggered the increasing internationalization of Thai tertiary education programs, understanding how international inter-university activities empower Thai universities to deliver cross-cultural learning that builds the inter-cultural competencies needed among their students to enable them to capture the existing and emerging opportunities from ASEAN makes this paper relevant.

Keywords: ASEAN, cross-cultural competency, economic block, tertiary education, bureaucratic red tapes, regionalism

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rise and relevance of regional blocks opted for a drastic move by nation states toward enhancing their citizens' competency across cultures, especially among the world's 21st century workforce. Besides, the dynamic nature of the modern business environment and advances in technology and logistics further make such competencies valuable asset required to strengthen the connectivity both at domestic, regional and international levels (Wheelen & Hunger, 2004). Since ASEAN took off in full in 2016, Thai public and private sectors have witnessed an unprecedented rise in dealing with clients with diverse cultural backgrounds from across South East Asia. As a result, Thai universities are now experimenting how inter-universities programs can impact inter-cultural competencies highly needed by the new generation of workforce in Thailand. Irrespective of the awareness, there are mixed results from Thai participants involved in these programs as they struggle to balance the positive and negative cultural influences that occur in interacting with other cultures in a cross-cultural learning environment.

Consequently, Thai universities' efforts regarding inter-cultural competencies through internationalization and regionalization are largely confined to the enhancements of academic programmes and relevant development agendas predominantly within Thai context even though scholars have consistently advocated for the building of a global perspective workforce as the key to the success of a nation (Jones & George, 2003). This is because the contemporary businesses world is dominated by numerous conflicting forces that demand adequate cross-cultural knowledge to penetrate the 21st century's labour market (Mahmoud, 2012).

In addition, one social learning theory (the theory of reciprocal determinism) by Bandura opined that learning takes place within a social context and is facilitated through modeling, observation and imitation. This theory maintains that a person's behavior, environment and personal qualities all reciprocally influence each other (Bandura, 1989). This theory is significant as it helps the researcher to determine how the inter-university collaboration, exchanges and activities in Thailand have contributed to enhancing cross-cultural learning among Thai students, which is one of the aims of this study.

2. Objectives

This study aims to achieve the followings:

1. To explore existing international inter-university activities for quality and effectiveness in enhancing Thai students competencies for ASEAN integration
2. To study and analyze best practices in cross-cultural competence knowledge development and their results
3. To examine the challenges in facilitating and holding these activities in Thailand for recommendations
4. To develop guidelines for policy makers

3. Materials and Methods

This paper used of both in-depth analysis of relevant secondary data and primary research elements. The data were collected through interviews and specimens observation using qualitative and investigative analysis method and analytical approaches. It focuses mainly on the effectiveness of the existing inter-universities activities and practices. It also examines results and the implications involved in enhancing Thai students cross-cultural competencies to ensure any challenges are addressed. The rationale for this is to find out in much detail the activities and programs that may have effectively contributed to empowering Thai students' abilities. This is to ascertain to what degree these activities and programs are abysmal or successful in Thailand based on relevant analysis, scholarly studies, respondents' opinions, and personal first-hand experience as the executive secretary to the Association of Universities in Asia and the Pacific.

This study was conducted using a comparative analysis of the activities of two active AUAP (Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific) member universities in Thailand - Naresuan University, Phitsanuloke and Prince Songkla University, Songkla Campus in Hatyai - due to their consistent history in holding international inter-university activities with participants from Southeast Asian universities, and from both AUAP and non AUAP members.

The study also examines the primary records of announcement materials and events proceedings alongside documentary research. Interviews were also conducted on programme managers and events' coordinators. A system of gathering and recording satisfaction (Satisfaction Scale) both on experiential benefits from these activities and overall satisfaction was favored and applied. The Association of American Colleges and Universities Intercultural knowledge and competence value rubric was also used to assess the abilities of the participants in the international inter-university activities as seen below.

Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric

The VALUE rubrics were developed by teams of faculty experts representing colleges and universities across the United States through a process that examined many existing campus rubrics and related documents for each learning outcome and incorporated additional feedback from faculty. The rubrics articulate fundamental criteria for each learning outcome, with performance descriptors demonstrating progressively more sophisticated levels of attainment. The rubrics are intended for institutional-level use in evaluating and discussing student learning, not for grading. The core expectations articulated in all 15 of the VALUE rubrics can and should be translated into the language of individual campuses, disciplines, and even courses. The utility of the VALUE rubrics is to position learning at all undergraduate levels within a basic framework of expectations such that evidence of learning can be shared nationally through a common dialog and understanding of student success.

Definition

Intercultural Knowledge and Competence is "a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts." (Bennett, J. M. 2008. Transformative training: Designing programs for culture learning. In Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Understanding and utilizing cultural diversity to build successful organizations, ed.M. A. Moodian, 95-110. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.)

Framing Language

The call to integrate intercultural knowledge and competence into the heart of education is an imperative born of seeing ourselves as members of a world community, knowing that we share the future with others. Beyond mere exposure to culturally different others, the campus community requires the capacity to: meaningfully engage those others, place social justice in historical and political context, and put culture at the core of transformative learning. The intercultural knowledge and competence rubric suggests a systematic way to measure our capacity to identify our own cultural patterns, compare and contrast them with others, and adapt empathically and flexibly to unfamiliar ways of being.

The levels of this rubric are informed in part by M. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, M.J. 1993. Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In Education for the intercultural experience, ed. R. M. Paige, 22-71. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press). In addition, the criteria in this rubric are informed in part by D.K. Deardorff's intercultural framework which is the first research-based consensus model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, D.K. 2006. The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. Journal of Studies in International Education 10(3): 241-266). It is also important to understand that intercultural knowledge and competence is more complex than what is reflected in this rubric. This rubric identifies six of the key components of intercultural knowledge and competence, but there are other components as identified in the Deardorff model and in other research.

Glossary

The definitions that follow were developed to clarify terms and concepts used in this rubric only.

- Culture: All knowledge and values shared by a group.
- Cultural rules and biases: Boundaries within which an individual operates in order to feel a sense of belonging to a society or group, based on the values shared by that society or group.
- Empathy: "Empathy is the imaginary participation in another person's experience, including emotional and intellectual dimensions, by imagining his or her perspective (not by assuming the person's position)". Bennett, J. 1998. Transition shock: Putting culture shock in perspective. In Basic concepts of intercultural communication, ed. M. Bennett, 215-224. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Intercultural experience: The experience of an interaction with an individual or groups of people whose culture is different from your own.
- Intercultural/cultural differences: The differences in rules, behaviors, communication and biases, based on cultural values that are different from one's own culture.
- Suspends judgment in valuing their interactions with culturally different others: Postpones assessment or evaluation (positive or negative) of interactions with people culturally different from one self.
Disconnecting from the process of automatic judgment and taking time to reflect on possibly multiple meanings.
- Worldview: Worldview is the cognitive and affective lens through which people construe their experiences and make sense of the world around them.

Figure 1 Association of American colleges and universities intercultural knowledge competence value rubric

Table 1 Association of American colleges and universities intercultural knowledge competence value rubric

	Capstone	Milestones		Benchmark
	4	3	2	1
Knowledge Cultural self-awareness	Articulates insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g. seeking complexity; aware of how her/his experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description.)	Recognizes new perspectives about own cultural rules and biases (e.g. not looking for sameness; comfortable with the complexities that new perspectives offer.)	Identifies own cultural rules and biases (e.g. with a strong preference for those rules shared with own cultural group and seeks the same in others.)	Shows minimal awareness of own cultural rules and biases (even those shared with own cultural group(s)) (e.g. uncomfortable with identifying possible cultural differences with others.)
Knowledge Knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks	Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates adequate understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates partial understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.	Demonstrates surface understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs and practices.
Skills Empathy	Interprets intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview and demonstrates ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group.	Recognizes intellectual and emotional dimensions of more than one worldview and sometimes uses more than one worldview in interactions.	Identifies components of other cultural perspectives but responds in all situations with own worldview.	Views the experience of others but does so through own cultural worldview.

Table 1 Association of American colleges and universities intercultural knowledge competence value rubric (Continue)

	Capstone	Milestones		Benchmark
	4	3	2	1
Skills Verbal and nonverbal communication	Articulates a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings) and is able to skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on those differences.	Recognizes and participates in cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and begins to negotiate a shared understanding based on those differences.	Identifies some cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and is aware that misunderstandings can occur based on those differences but is still unable to negotiate a shared understanding.	Has a minimal level of understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication; is unable to negotiate a shared understanding.
Attitudes Curiosity	Asks complex questions about other cultures, seeks out and articulates answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.	Asks deeper questions about other cultures and seeks out answers to these questions.	Asks simple or surface questions about other cultures.	States minimal interest in learning more about other cultures.
Attitudes Openness	Initiates and develops interactions with culturally different others. Suspends judgment in valuing her/his interactions with culturally different others.	Begins to initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others. Begins to suspend judgment in valuing her/his interactions with culturally different others.	Expresses openness to most, if not all, interactions with culturally different others. Has difficulty suspending any judgment in her/his interactions with culturally different others, and is aware of own judgment and expresses a willingness to change.	Receptive to interacting with culturally different others. Has difficulty suspending any judgment in her/his interactions with culturally different others, but is unaware of own judgment.

4. Results and Discussion

Despite the AEASN integration that amplified the importance of cross-cultural competencies within the region in 2015, international and inter-university collaboration between universities in Thailand and abroad already bid fair to become a hallmark of enhancing cross-cultural competencies into the 21st century. According to available data from the Commission on Higher Education (CHE), Thai higher institutions offered 465 international programs in 2004, 520 programs in 2005, 727 in 2006, 844 in 2007 and 884 in 2008 alone, making a total of 3,441 international programs using English as a medium of expression across its tertiary education institutions between 2004 and 2008. By 3013, the number went up to 1,044 international programs offered by both Thai private and public institutions in that year along.

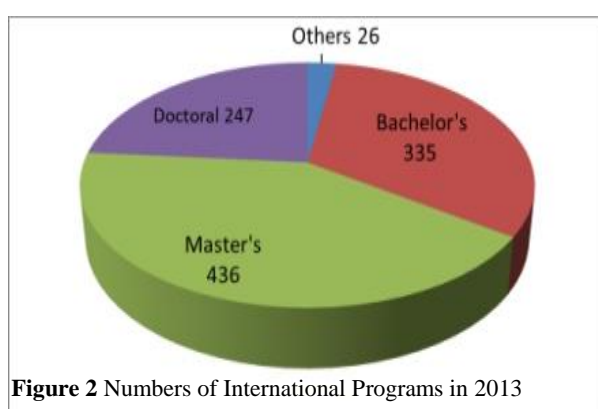


Figure 2 Numbers of International Programs in 2013

As ASEAN businesses begin operating in the regional and global marketplace where cross-cultural relationships and understanding are highly needed, it becomes even more imperative that Thailand is leaving no stones unturned in ensuring Thai tertiary institutions takes the lead in the crusade to empower its citizens with the needed cross-cultural competencies required to maintain its position as the economic (manufacturing) powerhouse and international education hub of the region. It was therefore not a surprise that Prince of Songkhla University hosted her 29th Inter-University Conference at the 60th Anniversary of His Majesty the King's Accession to the

Throne International Convention Center in Hat Yai on November 1, 2012. In trying to understand how such inter-universities activities or programs aid in improving Thai students' competencies, the study discovered from data collected from PSU and NU that effective enhancement of such competencies within the tertiary institution context takes place when students or participants are engaged in effective intercultural learning activities, classroom instruction, and exchange programs and while forming cross-cultural relationships within and outside such intercultural learning environment. Interestingly, this has become a common trend among Thai tertiary institutions that are at the fore front of the battle to prepare Thai students for ASEAN Integration. See table 4.1 below for the total list of International inter-activities and programs in PSU alone in 6 years.

Table 2 List of international inter-universities activities and participants in PSU

Participants in PSU International Inter-universities Activities								
Number	List of International Inter-Activities and programs	Academic Year						Sum with weight
		June 2012	June 2013- May 2014	Aug 2013- July 2014	Aug 2014- July 2015	Aug 2016- July 2017	Aug 2017- July 2018	
		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	

1	Activity Under ASEAN University Network (AUN)	0	8	7	10	17	8	50
2	Student Exchange Through ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS)	0	5	0	5	6	0	16

Table 2 List of international inter-universities activities and participants in PSU (Continue)

Participants in PSU International Inter-universities Activities								
Number	List of International Inter-Activities and programs	Academic Year						Sum with weight
		June 2012 - May 2013	June 2013- May 2014	Aug 2013- July 2014	Aug 2014- July 2015	Aug 2016 -July 2017	Aug 2017- July 2018	
		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	
3	The TF LEARN Program@NUS	0	0	3	2	0	0	5
4	ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS)	7	10	10	10	9	10	56
5	Exploring ASEAN	0	22	24	10	25	0	81
6	PSU English Camp Ball State University, USA	99	168	141	134	98	0	640
7	Student Exchange with South China Agricultural University	10	0	16	11	0	0	37
8	Student Exchange with Southwest University of Political Science and Law	0	0	0	8	16	0	24
9	Student Exchange with Tamkang University, Taiwan R.O.C.	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
10	Student Exchange with Jiangxi University of Science and Technology	0	27	0	19	0	0	46

11	Student Exchange with Jiangxi Normal University	0	0	10	0	10	0	20
12	Student Exchange with Guangdong University of Technology	10	10	10	0	10	0	40
13	Youth Innovation Competition on Lantsang-Mekong Region's Governance and Development (YICMG)	0	0	0	0	9	0	9
14	ASEAN Future Leaders Summit (AFLES 2016)	30	30	25	21	23	0	129
15	PSU-USM Leadership Exchange Program (UPLEEx)	0	30	0	0	0	0	30
16	Global Undergraduate Exchange Program-Scholarship	1	1	1	1	0	0	4
Total number students per Academic Year		157	311	247	231	223	22	1191

In fact, data from table 4.1 above show that between 2012 and 2017, about 1191 students have participated in international inter-university activities at PSU. Out of this number, 50 students participated in the Activity Under ASEAN University Network (AUN) program, Student Exchange through ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) attracted 16 students, just 5 students signed in for The TF LEARN Program@NUS, ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) had 56 students who joined the program, Exploring ASEAN had 81 students within this period.

In addition, PSU English Camp by Ball State University came to the top of the list of popular programs with 640 participants, 37 student got enlisted into Student Exchange with South China Agricultural University, 24 students picked interest in Student Exchange with Southwest University of Political Science and Law, only 4 students took part in Student Exchange with Tamkang University, Taiwan R.O.C., Student Exchange with Jiangxi University of Science and Technology appealed to 46 students, Within the same period, 20 students attended Student Exchange with Jiangxi Normal University, 40 students went for Student Exchange with Guangdong University of Technology, just about 9 students were involved in Youth Innovation Competition on Lantsang-Mekong Region's Governance and Development (YICMG), ASEAN Future Leaders Summit (AFLES 2016) attracted 129 students, 30 lined up for PSU-USM Leadership Exchange Program (UPLEEx), while only 4 participants benefited from the Global Undergraduate Exchange Program-Scholarship.

Using inbound and outbound activities classified by Prince Songkla University consisting of 8 parts, (A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H) based on the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value of Rubric as designed by Association of American Colleges and Universities, on one hand, revealed as follows:

- 1) That based on cultural awareness, participants in these programs are favorably empowered to articulate well about cultural rules and biases when it comes to considering what is appropriate or not in their cultures.
- 2) In communicating or dealing with people from other cultures, Students can identify own cultural rules and biases slightly below being favorable based on knowledge of cultural worldview framework.

- 3) Their abilities to show new understanding about one's cultural rules and biases in handling verbal and nonverbal communication across cultures was between slightly favourable and least favourable.
- 4) Also, their curiosity in learning other cultures and perception about the value of other cultures also fell slightly below a satisfactory rating. And their abilities to interact with people across cultures based on openness came between slightly favourable and least favourable.
- 5) In trying to understand what the PSU and NU students considered to be appropriate or inappropriate in their communication, dealings, awareness of bodily gestures, expression of emotion (verbal and non-verbal communication), and interest in knowing other culture etc., it was discovered that reconciling the taboos in one's culture with other cultures, differences in emotion expression, and lack of interest in learning others foreign cultures remain a very big challenge to most Thai students in the exchange program.
- 6) It was also discovered that recognizing new perspectives about one's cultural rules and biases such as not

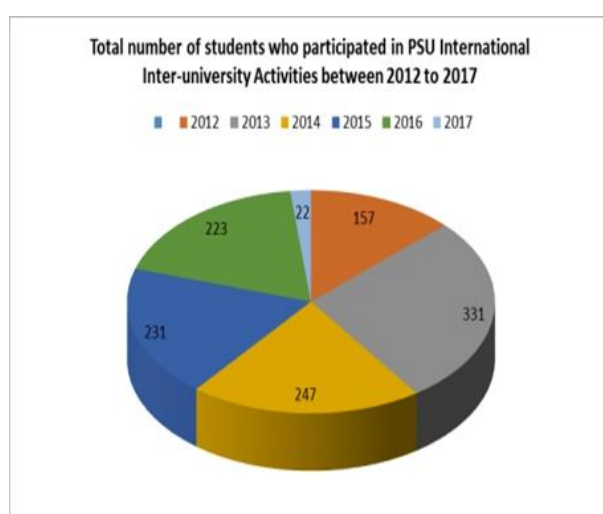


Figure 3 Participants in PUS activities for six years

looking for sameness; being comfortable with the complexities that new perspectives offer remains a problem, which also impede free interaction and dealing with people from other cultures as can be seen from the table

above and figure 4.1 on the left margin.

In an attempt to discover the role and most effective activities that enhance Thai students cross-cultural knowledge for ASEAN integration, the data collected in the study conclude that English Language related inter-university Activities such as the PSU English Camp by Ball State University that attracted 640 participants within the period is the most effective due to its role in enhancing Thai students English Language proficiency skills. This is because these programs were tailored to encourage participants (students) to discuss their

personal challenges and positive experiences with their partners, instructors, and the program coordinators etc.

Some students also maintained that students participation in universities activities that connect them with the locals at the communities level like volunteering providing them with real opportunities to enhance their cross-cultural skills very well as this often creates an opportunity for both the host nations and foreign students to get into each other's skin and walk around in each other shoes to better understand the strength in their diversities and appreciate the experiences such opportunity offer.

It was also discovered in this study that ASEAN related activities came second because of participants' awareness of the need for such regional cross-cultural competencies. For example, ASEAN Future Leaders Summit (AFLES 2016) attracted 129 participants; Exploring ASEAN lured 81, ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) appealed to 56 etc. The next performing activities are the Chinese related ones.

Despite the language appeal, it was discovered that these activities provided a contemporary opportunity for the students to examine opposing arguments about different cultures and encourages critical thinking, students were also encouraged to work in unfamiliar and diverse groups in classrooms during these activities which provided them with the chance to reflect on their differing learning experiences thereby serving as an opportunity for students to generate their own ideas because of the inclusive learning environment.

Thus, the most performing activities in enhancing cross-cultural competencies are those tailored toward ASEAN integration awareness and English and Chinese Language. This clearly shows a strong will by the students to improve their cross-cultural competencies for ASEAN integration and expand their horizons beyond the region.

To answer the third research question, the study investigated some of the challenges Thai students face in enhancing their multicultural abilities in the international inter-university activities and it was discovered that 95% of the participants agree that lack of strong teacher–student rapport constitute a serious setback to Thai students who hardly ask questions or engaged in the classroom discussion due to language proficiency. They also agree that besides language proficiency, Thai students are already used to the teacher-centered learning environment in their traditional schooling system where teachers do it all and students are not given opportunity to ask questions. Therefore, even when students have the chance to do so, they do not usually have the confidence to do so for fear of lack of respect for teachers. As a result, students' academic performances in these programs affect their competencies level.

Aside from the aforementioned, the study pointed out that intra-cultural aspects also influence the students and teachers' related perception on the issue studied alongside the cross-cultural aspects. For example, over 95% of the respondents who participated in these programs hold the opinion that their expectation of an international university programs that enhance cross cultural competencies is one that reflect the international background of the faculty staff and teachers, not just the students' background. They also agreed that the intra-cultural dominance of these programs in most cases affect their motivation and opportunity to fully take advantage of these programs. Despite the motivation demerits, it was discovered in the study that intra-cultural dominance of international programs deprives faculty members from offering Thai students global education perspectives. This also constitutes a hindrance because such approach undermines the diversity and differing cultural experiences, expectations, and learning styles international students bring to the tertiary education classroom that would have been very beneficial to them.

Besides, the study discovered that the majority of international activities in Thailand for the last 5 to 20 years have centered around regional integration for ASEAN through sports, academic and leadership training etc. on like in Vietnam where their youth empowerment programs mostly emphasize global skills required beyond ASEAN integration, such an approach has not been given the desired attention in Thailand. Thus, institutions actually pursue up to 75 percent of their objectives towards the inter-university activities while about 25% other activities within which do not contribute to their national tailored objectives. Thus program organizers and institutions do not strategically align their programmes with tailored objectives that meet the participants' demand due to external influence and limited resources and competition.

In assessing how policy-making over international inter-university activity in Thailand can be assisted to enhance Thai students cross-cultural competencies for ASEAN integration, the study found out that most Thai International inter-universities programs have gone global judging the composition of the nationalities of the students in these programs, which is a strength in the policy making process. While this sounds like good news, it is however not without problems. According to the key informants used in this study, one of the greatest challenges faced by international inter university activities success in enhancing competencies is the diverse background of the participants and faculty members such as culture, learning needs, belief system, learning style, and motivation, including communication style etc.

To that end, the study suggests that to harmonize these differences and convert them into competency strength, effort must be made at the decision making level to identify and leverage the differences between Thai students and foreign students in these activities and programs. If this is met, Thai students will overcome these difficulties they face in these programs and find satisfaction in participating in the activities, which will likely increase their competencies for ASEAN integration

Also, data gathered in this study shows that the number of ASEAN students in these programs is still very limited. Using NU as an example, the total number of 43 international students participated in the activities at NU for a duration of 102 days between January through September, 2012. The number of students who participated in the program came from four countries within Asia namely Japan, Australia, Malaysia and South Korea.

These programmes include 1) Project of NU-IMUS Partnership Enhancing Education and Cultural Exchange, Phase II, 2) NU & YSU Educational and Cultural Collaborative Exchange Program 2015, 3) Cultural Exchange Program, 4) Imus Partnership Enhancing Education and Cultural Exchange, Phase III, 5) Imus Partnership Enhancing Education and Cultural Exchange, Phase IV, 6) Imus Institute Enhancing Education

and Cultural Exchange, Phase V, 7) Imus Institute Enhancing Education & Cultural Exchange, 8) and NU & YSU Collaborative Language and Cultural Exchange Program.

Out of these four countries, Japanese students account for the highest of about 22 students followed by Australia with 10 students, 9 from Malaysia and just 2 from South Korea while the other 7 ASEAN countries are left out as many of them asserted that the financial cost of the programs is a hitch irrespective of the fact that almost all of these programs are cross-culturally designed to empower ASEAN citizens collectively due to the progress Thailand has made in its effort to position itself as the regional education hub in ASEAN. See table below.

Table 3 International student's activities classified by inbound and outbound during 1 October 2011 - 30 September 2012 (Fiscal Year 2012) "inbound students to NU"

Universities	Countries	Number of International Students	Duration	period
Southern Cross University (SCU Project)	Australia	10	30 days	17 JAN - 11 FEB 2012
Dongduk Woman's University	Korea	2	30 days	19 Dec 2011 - 14 JAN 2012
Universiti Sains Malaysia	Malaysia	9	6 days	8 - 13 FEB 2012
Osaka International University	Japan	2	30 days	5 AUG - 2 SEP 2012
Aichi University (Field Work)	Japan	20	6 days	10 - 15 SEP 2012
Total		43	102 days	

According to the Thai students who participated in such similar programs, such interaction with ASEAN students help directly increase their knowledge about their neighbors and create an opportunity for them to establish relationships across ASEAN which they need to deal with each other successfully in and outside the university. The Japanese and Australians who participated in these programs also acknowledged that their increased engagement in ASEAN activities is a strong indication of this awareness (the need for their students to enhance their cross-cultural understanding about Thailand so as to enable these countries tap from such strength to benefit from the ASEAN integration, including the fact that they can afford it.) and recognition of the relevance of the block.

The study suggest that to effectively empower Thai citizens cross-cultural competencies for ASEAN integration, Thailand should pursue policies that provide its citizens with real opportunities to interact with citizens from these countries and beyond, especially at the tertiary institution level. That includes but not only more effort to provide financial aid opportunity to more other ASEAN students who cannot afford to study in these programs due to the financial cost to do so; expand its intake of foreign students across the globe, but also

Inter-universities activities should also be streamlined to their inter-cultural impacts and institutional contributions to enhance mutual understanding and bridge cross-cultural differences which host countries students usually struggle with in inter-university programs classroom.

In addition, the expansion of the scope of international inter-universities and cross-cultural activities across Thai educations institutions into the community level will provide the locals the opportunity to also benefit from such an experience. This can help empower the locals to overcome their cultural biases and change the cultural lenses they use in seeing other cultures, which could ease their

discomfort with the new generation Thais whose struggle to enhance their cross-cultural abilities for ASEAN integration is often met with resistance by the local elderly ones in most cases.

Furthermore, strategic auditing should also be conducted frequently by the government to review the performances of these international inter-universities activities and programs for quality assurance, consistency, and standardization because of the unduly competition among themselves due to limited available resources to ensure that they results meet the increase funding by the education ministry. For example, although not all the PSU activities were used in this study due to their differences in value among students, however, according to the data collected, the inconsistent nature of these programs led to a drop in participants' interest especially between 2016 and 2017 and could account for why the university stumbled to 251-300 in THE ranking from the previous 201-250 standing in 2017.

Another way is to ensure that program coordinators, teachers, and faculty members adopt effective cross-cultural learning practices that reflect awareness of the cultural diversity in these programs and yet provide tailored academic and social learning opportunities to both Thais and foreign students, but with special emphasis on preparing Thai students for effective interactions in an ASEAN and global society by encouraging and providing them with the opportunity to take good advantage of the global diversity inter-university activities offer to host nations.

In fact, policy makers, participants and other stakeholders must be carried along so as to gain considerable political will in making policies that support international inter-university activities in tertiary education in Thailand to yield expected results. If this is attained, the shift in the policy paradigm will not only greatly assist international inter-university activities in Thailand tertiary institutions to deliver the required results in enhancing Thai students' competences for ASEAN integration, but also position the nation as the international education hub of ASEAN effectively.

4.1 Discussion

According to the data analyzed, the ASEAN integration would largely impact Thailand positively and negatively in the socio-economic and political-cultural aspects depending on Thais cross-cultural competitiveness. In particular, the economic potential and tremendously high cross-markets make the region a cultural melting pot, aside from its natural resources. Though progress has been made, however, available evidence revealed that international and regional inter-university activities-based exchanges have gained popularity among Thai tertiary institutions. Despite that, Thai students' cross-cultural competencies needed to catch up with this integration as expected remains questionable due to the fact that most of these programs failed to prioritize education that focus on creating a knowledge-based society.

For instance, Thailand's recent ranking in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessments) test results put it at near the bottom of Asia is an indication that the flourishing international programs in Thailand is actually not living up to their expectation due to cross-cultural barriers. According to the Pisa survey, Thailand ranked 54th for maths, 57th for reading, and 54th for sciences. Standing at 54th, Thailand's overall performance is far below other Asian countries. Singapore was the top performer in all three subjects in the Pisa tests, followed by Japan in second place, Taiwan in fourth, China in sixth, while Vietnam did well at eighth (Dumrongkiat, 2016).

With the growing relevance of the ASEAN integration, it is therefore imperative to embrace different approaches such as participatory instruction models that incorporate inter-cultural dynamics within the ASEAN using methods and platforms that focus on empowering their students for the integration. Also, the participation of a bigger number of regional participants and key players will be pivotal as too often these activities are not successfully organized via the initiative of one organization alone.

This conformed with the words of Dr. Mohammad Naim Yaakub, Director General Colombo Plan Staff College for Technician Education in his special lecture on the challenges in education for the ASEAN Community 2015 that "In terms of higher education, a broader strategic objective of ensuring the integration of education priorities into ASEAN development, the education objectives aim to advance and prioritize education and focus on: creating a knowledge-based society; achieving universal access to primary education; promoting early child care and development; and enhancing awareness of ASEAN to youths through education and activities to build an ASEAN identity based on friendship and cooperation.", he maintained.

Aside from the above PISA result that put Thai tertiary institutions performance at the bottom among some of its ASEAN institutions, Phil Baty, the editorial director of global ranking, revealed in a recent 2018 Asia University Rankings released Wednesday 13 March, 2018 by Times Higher Education (THE) magazine what he described as “worrying” about the decline of several top Thai universities in the rankings based on the assessment on 13 indicators, such as the volume, income, reputation, citation (influence of research performance), teaching and learning environment et cetera.

In the report, Chulalongkorn University, went down from the 151-160 band to 164th. King Mongkut’s Institute of Technology Ladkrabang slid from 201-250, to 181-190 group. King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi fell to 114th from the 101-110 band. Chiangmai University nosedived to 201-250, from the 171-180 position. Khon Kaen University and Prince of Songkla University stumbled to 251-300 from the previous 201-250 standing. King Mongkut’s University of Technology North Bangkok was demoted to the 301–350 to fall among the least performing universities this year, down from the 251+ rank where it finished a year earlier. However, this 2018 rating that includes 359 universities in 25 Asian countries saw Mahidol university advanced to 97th place as the top Thai university dumping Chulalongkorn University to just number 3. Also, Suranaree University of Technology leapfrog to 168th from the previous 191-200 position held in 2017 calendar, while Kasetsart University felt comfortable within its initial 251–300 band in 2017.

In addition, the first ASEAN Youth Development index published in 2017, Thailand overall YDI stood at 0.481 in 2015 with an increasing trend from 2011, which place Thailand above the regional average in education within a domain classified as the highest scoring. However, irrespective of the increase, Thailand recorded a slight decline in employment and opportunity largely because of an increase in Youth Unemployment Ration (YUR) which is ranked at 10 implying that Thai youths are 10 times more likely to be unemployed than adults in the labour market. When compared with Vietnam, for example, Vietnam recorded a strong increasing trend above the regional average in education from 2011 to 2015 with a score of 0.667. This is partly due to the formulation of the Vietnamese Youth Development Strategy 2011-2020 which aimed at developing a highly patriotic generation and a young and globally oriented workforce that meet today’s market demands. As a result, it shows a very high increase in the participation and engagement domain putting the number of its youths involved in volunteered Time almost doubling to 19% in 2015 with those involved in assisting strangers at 57 %.

Generally, the report concluded that the youth of ASEAN decline in competitiveness is at 6.4 times more likely to be unemployed than their adult counterparts in the labour force. According to Vongthep Arthakaivalvatee, Deputy-Secretary General for ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), though education has improved significantly across the region, nevertheless, employment and opportunity slightly declined. He blamed the gaps on the lack of these two domains to work in concert and called for greater inclusiveness through ASEAN such as through the ASCC initiative on “Culture of Prevention” that embrace resiliency as a means to overcome the negative social problems that a huge educated unemployable youth population could have on ASEAN in achieving peaceful, inclusive, and resilient societies for the well-being of its youth.

Hopefully, some of the examples of key trends in tertiary education in Thailand such as the Thailand 4.0, Cooperative Education and Work-Integrated Learning for the New Generation Workforce and better management of International inter-university activities for Thai university students could be a great bridging elements and a constructive platform to achieve some of the embedded inter-cultural goals acknowledged by Dr. Mohammad Naim Yaakub, especially now that the education ministry receives the highest allocation (Deboonme, Achara, 2016). It is thus, the researcher’s contention that programmes could now be adequately funded and goals met.

5. Conclusion

Data collected and analyzed in this study conclude that though Thailand has invested hugely into its higher education institutions and has been hailed for its gallant efforts in its struggle to position itself among the contending international education hub and economic powerhouse of ASEAN in many fronts, however, the Thai universities international inter-universities programs that are meant to equip its students with the highly needed cross-cultural competencies required to build a strong and vibrant human resource

capacity that Thailand desires to capture these 21 century's opportunities emerging from ASEAN integration are deficient and not in pari-passu with its investment into the education sectors. Such deficiencies contribute to why even the agencies vested with the responsibilities to achieve these goals usually compromised the system directly or indirectly.

For obvious reasons, the government education budget allocation to the 10 top Thai universities has been hiked to ameliorate the shortcomings discovered in this study. Nonetheless, the lack of a streamlined and increased international inter-universities projects, programmes and activities that are based on modeling-solution approach by all the concerned national, regional and international professional bodies and stakeholders remains a challenge that hinders the progress.

Also Thai aging population problem demands that more seats become empty at school. Thus, further lack of will and experience to attract more oversea students into Thai tertiary institutions that focuses on not just filling the empty seats in the classrooms for numbers and financial gains, but also for the benefit of capturing such cross-cultural shared experiences, including the desire to retain and absorb international students with exceptional performances and excellent intellectual capabilities into Thai workforce upon graduation remain a challenge that contributes to a lack of adequate cross-cultural abilities among its workforce.

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